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AN INTRODUCTION TO  
CHRISTIAN MYSTICISM



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LONDON: H. R. ALLENSON, LIMITED,  
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AN INTRODUCTION TO  
CHRISTIAN  
MYSTICISM

BY

ELEANOR C. GREGORY

WITH PREFATORY LETTER BY

DR ALEXANDER WHYTE

EDINBURGH



LONDON: H. R. ALLENSON, LTD.

RACQUET COURT, 114 FLEET STREET, E.C.

*First Edition, 1901.*

*Second Edition, Heart and Life Booklets, 1908.*

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PREFATORY LETTER BY  
DR ALEXANDER WHYTE

7 CHARLOTTE SQUARE,  
EDINBURGH.

THANK you for letting me see this excellent paper. I rejoice in the publication of anything that helps to turn the public mind to the study of the great spiritual writers; and this lecture will form an admirable introduction to that greatest and best of all studies.

With best wishes,  
ALEXANDER WHYTE.

## P R E F A C E

THIS short paper was prepared for reading before the Portsmouth Ladies' Society. The limit of time therefore must be pleaded as an additional excuse for the imperfection of the treatment.

ELEANOR C. GREGORY.

DEANERY, ST PAUL'S.

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# I

## INTRODUCTORY

SINCE no two people are agreed upon what Mysticism is and what it is not, the task of any one who undertakes to talk about it is both peculiarly easy and peculiarly difficult. Easy, because it is the simplest thing in the world for a person cheerfully and superficially to define what *he thinks* Mysticism means ; and difficult if he desires to dive rather more deeply into what it has meant to other people.

We will make no attempt, here and now, to trace or follow out any system of mystical philosophy ; but, with the object of giving some sort of guide for possible study, merely collect together a few thoughts (mostly of other people's) upon men and things connected with Mysticism.

It is generally agreed that Mysticism is viewed with dislike, and certainly with



## Christian Mysticism

distrust. It suffers also from some of its best friends being wont to reckon all its extravagances and eccentricities as its essentials—an inverted way of looking at it one would think, but perhaps natural enough to those whose eyes are very widely opened to its dangers. To condemn it because it is liable to great abuse is hardly more reasonable than to condemn the use of light and fire because they will blind and burn. A rather suggestive though incomplete parallel may be found in Nihilism. Nihilism, so far as can be gathered from such information as is available, is a nickname bestowed indiscriminately upon all who seek social reform in Russia by whatever means. By social reform I mean such elementary forms of justice as trial before sentence, punishment proportioned to the offence, the liberty of the Press, and so on. The Terrorists who imagine that peace on earth can be hurried up by dynamite and devastation are alone *Nihilists*; but they and the peaceful “district visiting” kind of reformer have got inextricably muddled up in people’s minds, and are involved in a common and sulphurous condemnation.

## Introductory

So Mysticism suffers from its connection with several thoroughly and traditionally mistrusted bugbears—with Mystery for example, which many English minds take to mean something that is certainly dangerous and probably wicked ; with visions and trances, which the same persons will tell you are obvious nonsense, and connected only with the digestion ; with monkishness, seclusion from the world, and wild ideas generally. That Mysticism is connected with Mystery no one can wish to deny when they hear the significant and far-reaching meaning given to Mystery by St Chrysostom : "A mystery," he says, "is that which is everywhere proclaimed, but which is not understood by those who have not right judgement." Out of the twenty-six definitions of Mysticism given by Mr Inge at the end of his Bampton Lectures, here are a few of the least obscure : "The complete union of the soul with GOD is the goal of all Mysticism" (Canon Overton). "Mysticism is the immediate feeling of the unity of the self with GOD ; it is nothing therefore but the fundamental feeling of religion—the religious life at its very heart and

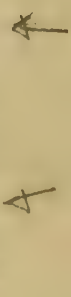
## Christian Mysticism

centre" (Pfleiderer). "Mysticism appears in connection with the endeavour of the human mind to grasp the Divine essence of the ultimate reality of things, and to enjoy the blessedness of actual communion with the Highest. The first is the philosophic side of Mysticism; the second its religious side" (Prof. Seth). R. A. Vaughan defines it thus: "Mysticism is that form of error which mistakes for a Divine manifestation the operations of a merely human faculty." This miserable phrase, which is of the kind used by the class of men who always like to say "It merely thunders" when the voice of GOD is speaking, is the only definition to be found in that unsatisfactory but indispensable book, "Hours with the Mystics." As a collection of the opinions and sayings of the chief Mystics it is most valuable (partly because, until Mr Inge's book appeared, it was unique); but the form in which the book is cast, and the manner in which the subject is approached are both extremely repellent.

(Mr Inge's definition is: "The attempt to realise, in thought and feeling, the immanence" (or *in* and *through-dwelling*)

## Introductory

“of the temporal in the eternal, and the eternal in the temporal.” The late Bishop of London defined it as “the attempt to live upon a non-experimental plane.” The next and last is the one which can be adopted for the purposes of this paper: “Mysticism is the science of a hidden life.” To obtain union, or at least communion, with the Highest is thus, as may be seen, the endeavour of all Mysticism; and the way to this has generally been divided into three stages: the first, of Purification; the second, of Illumination; the third, of Union. This last stage, which is for the Mystic the kernel of the whole, presupposes strenuous cleansing of heart and mind, and is not attained without toilsome effort; but *when* attained is the highest of all possible conditions, being the uniting of the soul with GOD.



## II

### THE MYSTICS

#### (a) GROUPING

BOTH R. A. Vaughan and Mr Inge have divided the Mystics themselves into groups, according to their tendencies; and theirs are very interesting systems of classification, though liable to the same difficulty that besets all such systems—namely, the distressing propensity that things of beauty and merit have for getting out of line, and mixing up their labels, with no regard for the patient classifier.

Vaughan makes three classes, which he calls the theopathic, the theosophic, and the theurgic; or, to put them into rather more comprehensible language, the saint, the sage, and the spiritualist. By the spiritualist I ask you to have in mind *not* that degraded term which is commonly connected with spirit rappings and float-

## Classification

ings in the air (though these performances can boast an antiquity of at least 1700 or 1800 years), but a much nobler character, who traces manifestations and influences of the spirit through every form of life, organic or inorganic. This is a freer translation and a wider meaning than Vaughan intended, but the word will cover the extension.

The sage and the saint, the philosopher and the religiously minded man, need no explanation. The sage has throughout his history suffered from two opposite tendencies, to which, oddly enough, he appears to be equally prone—namely, the effort to become greatly less, or greatly more than the “reasonable man” seems intended to be. The saint is sometimes frightened of the spiritualist and impatient of the sage, and sometimes gives away his inheritance by disclaiming all connexion with either, confining the beautiful term of Mystic to one or other of them, to the exclusion of himself.

Mr Inge's grouping practically follows the same lines, though he names his groups rather differently—the Speculative Mystic answering to the sage, the Prac-

## Christian Mysticism

tical or Devotional Mystic to the saint, and the Nature Mystic (whom he places last and highest) to the spiritualist, as I have just described him.

### (b) HISTORICAL

Though we will reverse the position of these last, we will also begin by considering the Mystics of the speculative order; and, leaving aside for to-day the Mystics of India and the East, we fasten on the

Plato      great name of Plato, who is, it is widely conceded, the father of European Mysticism. The name of Plato appears and reappears, in cycles or waves of human thought, all down the centuries. Some of these are directly connected with Mysticism. First of all there are the Neo-platonists of Alexandria, coming about five hundred years after Plato and Socrates; then the Renaissance revived Neo-platonism at a distance of more than a thousand years; and a little later on, in England, in the middle of the seventeenth century, arose the group of men known as the Cambridge Platonists. A connected history of these revivals, comparing



## Philo

and contrasting them, should be, one would think, of the greatest interest. Of the three, the first and the last produced avowed Mystics.

In the first century, in Alexandria, lived

**Philo** Philo, the Jewish philosopher,

who, by his endeavour to reconcile the Old Testament with Greek, and especially Platonic philosophy, led the way to the Neo-platonist revival. It would take too long, even for a competent person, to give any kind of sketch of what he or any other of the philosophers taught as a system, as I have said before. But as we come up to these great figures of history, the utmost we can do within the limits of this paper is to try to associate with their names some one or two of their thoughts, which have become embedded in, or have some bearing upon Mysticism. Philo taught that "the kingdom of GOD is within us, even in this life; for this life's reward is holiness, the vision of GOD; its punishment, that of being what sinners are. This vision or knowledge of the Most High is the direct personal communion of a soul that no longer reasons, but feels and knows. It was

## Christian Mysticism

reached by Abraham through learning; by 'the wrestler' Jacob, through moral effort; by Isaac, 'the laughter of the soul,' through the natural development of a sweet and gracious spirit" (Dr Bigg). To every soul its own road. Hard upon Philo followed Clement of Alexandria

Origen and Origen, to whom is mainly owing the Christian mystical thought of the second century. Clement, in order to meet the disconcerting fact that all Christians did not attain the highest spiritual level, advances the theory (not original to him) of the Two Lives. Dr Bigg says, in his "Christian Platonists of Alexandria," from which these remarks on Clement and Origen are taken: "Clement proclaims that the life of the ordinary believer, that is to say, of the great body of the Church, is a lower life. Its marks are faith, fear, and hope. . . . It is the sphere of discipline, of repression, of painful effort. Its crown is . . . the negative virtue of self-control. Above it stands the higher life, which should follow naturally on the lower life, and after which all men and all women are bound to strive—the life of righteousness and

## Origen

knowledge and love," the "disinterested love" which figures so largely in the controversies which raged later round Molinos and Mme. Guyon. Clement, while talking of Apathy, or rather Detachment, as the highest state of the believer, does not divest it of practical virtues. He says that "contemplation is the perfected believer's chief delight; the next is active beneficence; the third is instruction, the work of making others like himself. GOD gives him an exceeding great reward, the salvation of other men." Both Clement and Origen accepted Allegorism—the finding of hidden meanings in the Holy Scriptures—as part of the teaching of the Church. They, and many of the Early Fathers, wove tissues of the most surprisingly beautiful insight, coupled with conjecture, around the letter of the Law and the Prophets, and also of the New Testament. St Thomas Aquinas, in the thirteenth century, collected sayings from these sources upon every verse in the four Gospels, a work known as the "Catena Aurea," the greatest monument of Allegorism.

We pass on to two exalted thinkers,

## Christian Mysticism

Plotinus and Epictetus, who, together with Marcus Aurelius, are, I suppose, the loftiest and most famous teachers among those who might have been Christians, and were not.

**Plotinus** Plotinus lived at the same time as Origen, and founded a school of disciples who, after the manner of disciples, went on to develop the lower instead of the higher parts of his philosophy after his death. He has influenced, and still influences men of very different types of mind, and under very different circumstances, from St Augustine to Maeterlinck. Plotinus divides the soul of man into two: "to the lower belong the animal life, pleasure and pain, desire, anger, sense; the higher comes to him straight from GOD and is like GOD, and differs from the Divine only in this, that while connected with the body it possesses memory, imagination . . . and a finite will" (Dr Bigg). Plotinus argued definitely in favour of the immortality of the soul, founding this belief upon "the soul's capacity for virtue." For him as for Philo, and later Mystics, the culmination of the life of the spirit was Vision, Ecstasy, "which comes to the purified soul suddenly, without warning,

## Epictetus

and is the immediate consciousness of the Divine" (Dr Bigg).

**Epictetus** It may be a great liberty to introduce Epictetus among the Mystics, for in no book on Mysticism can I find any mention of his name. But, although a Stoic philosopher, he fills his discourses with expressions almost identical with the language of Devotional Mysticism. Such are the following: "We must lose our own if we want what is not our own," and "I have ranged my pursuits under the direction of GOD. Is it His will that I should have a fever? It is my will too. . . . Is it His will that I should desire anything? It is my will too. Is it His will that I should obtain it? It is mine too. Is it not His will? It is not mine. . . . A person who reasons thus understands and considers that if he joins himself to GOD he shall go safely through his journey.—How do you mean, join himself?—That whatever is the will of GOD may be his will too; whatever is not the will of GOD may not be his." Again: "What is the will of GOD that I should do now? What is not His will? A little while ago it was His will that you should be at

## Christian Mysticism

leisure, should talk with yourself, should read, hear, prepare yourself. You have had sufficient time for this. At present He says to you: 'Come now to the combat. Show us what you have learned, how you have wrestled,'” and he concludes the *Enchiridion* in the words of Cleanthes, the Greek poet :

Conduct me, Jove, and thou, O Destiny,  
Wherever your decrees have fixed my station.  
I follow cheerfully ; and did I not,  
Wicked or wretched, I must follow still.

Of this, Thomas à Kempis sounds like a Christian echo, when he says: “If thou carry the Cross cheerfully, it will carry thee ; . . . if thou carry it unwillingly, thou makest for thyself a burden, and yet thou must bear.”

The mysterious character  
**Dionysius.** known as Dionysius the Areopagite has exercised a vast and very mixed influence upon the history of Christian Mysticism. The mediæval mystics were, as Mr Inge says, “steeped in him.” It is thought that he was a Syrian monk, and that “he perpetrated a deliberate, and, as he would think—pious fraud in fathering

## Dionysius

his books on St Paul's great Athenian convert." The two greatest errors with which Mysticism is charged, claim him on their side :—I mean Pantheism ; and Nothingness, "das Nichts," the Divine Dark. Of this Dionysius writes : "The mystic must leave behind all things, both in the sensible and intelligible worlds, till he enters into the darkness of knowing nothing that is truly mystical. . . . Our highest knowledge of GOD consists in mystic ignorance." This doctrine is closely connected with all Oriental Mysticism, and the Buddhist Nirvana. This seems to be the proper place for enlarging a little upon the remark that has been made concerning the endeavour of the mystic philosopher—the sage—to become either more or less than he is intended to be. To enter into the Divine Dark cannot but be—however it is defended or explained away—the abandoning of the higher functions of the soul, thinking thereby to liberate the spirit ; and as such, must mean arrested development on the part of some GOD-given faculty, the proper end for which is harmonious education with the whole, rather than suppression. But there



## Christian Mysticism

are not many who desire to enter upon this forbidding and isolated path. A far more living and acceptable error is Pantheism, which may be roughly and loosely expressed in the following syllogism : GOD is everything and everything is GOD : I am a thing : *therefore* I am GOD. Here the danger of endeavouring to become too much, rather than too little, is very patent. The following extracts from Mr Inge's book will serve as a further explanation. "Pantheism . . . (is) the doctrine that the universe is the complete and only expression of GOD, Who on this theory is only immanent, and not transcendent. On this view, everything in the world belongs to the Being of GOD, Who is manifested equally in everything. (As Indian sages say): 'The learned behold GOD alike in the reverend Brahmin, in the ox, and in the elephant, in the dog, and in him who eateth the flesh of dogs.' . . . This (theory) is inconsistent with any belief in purpose, either in the whole or in the parts. Evil therefore cannot exist for the sake of a higher good : it must be itself good. It is easy to see how this view of the world may pass into pessimism or nihilism ; for if

## Dionysius

everything is real and equally Divine, it makes no difference . . . whether we call anything good or bad. . . . Pantheistic also is any theory according to which GOD comes to Himself, attains full self-consciousness in the highest of His creatures. . . . This . . . involves the belief that time is an ultimate reality. If in the cosmic process which takes place in time, GOD becomes something which He was not before, it cannot be said that He is exalted above time, or that a thousand years are to Him as one day." In modern times, Emerson is perhaps the most conspicuous Pantheistic philosopher; his position as a thinker is thus described by Mr Inge: "Emerson . . . whose beautiful character was as noble a gift to humanity as his writing . . . yet shut his eyes to pain, death and sin even more resolutely than did Goethe. The optimism which is built on this foundation has no message of comfort for the stricken heart. . . . He cannot be acquitted of playing with Pantheistic Mysticism of the Oriental type, without seeing or without caring whither such speculations logically lead. . . . 'I, the imperfect, adore my own Perfect . . .

## Christian Mysticism

I am part of GOD,' and so on. This is not the language of those who have travelled up the mystical ladder instead of only writing about it. Even for those fourteenth century mystics who write most arrogantly, some think even blasphemously, about deification, 'the passage into the Divine glory is the final reward, only to be attained by all manner of exercises'; while for Emerson it seems to be a state already existing which we can realize by a mere act of intellectual apprehension. And the phrase 'man is a part of GOD'—as if the Divine spirit were *divided* among the organs which express its various activities, has been condemned by all the great speculative mystics from Plotinus downwards." That Pantheistic views are extinct, I think few will be found to assert: and the Emersonian type commends itself greatly to a generation that is perhaps increasing in the clear apprehension of a beautiful goal to mankind's pilgrimage; but which chafes with a sore impatience at the indispensable,—the *essential* preliminary of the journey. The same temper leads it often to seize on catchwords and high phrases, careless of their consequences or their

## Erigena

history ; without mental leisure to be at the pains to trace them through previous developments, in which as often as they have appeared, they have been explained, qualified, or refuted. To many intelligences theology is an ill-sounding name, nor will they accept the fact that one entire aspect of it is merely a divine philosophy. When, therefore, Pantheism is indiscriminately charged against all mysticism, we may reply that the doctrine of the indwelling or immanence of GOD, which is the heritage of every mystic, may be, and has been, from Dionysius to the present day,—pushed to this extreme ; but it does *not* logically follow from a full and clear statement of the mystical position. “The theories of Dionysius,” says Mr Inge, “were worked up into a consistent

philosophical system” by John Erigena. Scotus Erigena, an English or Irish monk who lived in the ninth century. The Pantheistic form of Mysticism was further continued by a group of theologians in France, where the Church was confronted with the problem of “how to encourage the warm love and faith of the Mystics, without giving rein to their mischievous

## Christian Mysticism

errors. The twelfth and thirteenth centuries produced several famous writers who attempted to solve this problem by combining Scholasticism and Mysticism. The leaders in this attempt were St Bernard, Hugo and Richard of St Victor **Victorines etc.** (the celebrated school in the outskirts of Paris), Bonaventura, and others. . . . They insist often on self-knowledge as the way to the knowledge of GOD, and on self-purification as more important than philosophy."

**Eckhart.** The man whom Mr Inge calls "the greatest of all speculative Mystics," Meister Eckhart, a Dominican monk, prior of Erfurt and afterwards vicar-general for Bohemia, was born about the middle of the thirteenth century. At this time religious opinion in Europe was divided, roughly speaking, into two opposing camps: the one, religious in name only, occupying the highest and most lucrative offices of the church; the other, composed largely of the poor and obscure, who sought, by banding themselves together, to support each other in leading and bringing others to lead a spiritual life. These confraternities and sects were of

## Eckhart

various degrees of worth, some of great purity and holiness, as the Friends of GOD ("die Gottesfreunde"), and others, starting with high aims, but sinking through the fanaticism and unbalanced zeal of their followers into degeneracy and licence. Of these, the Beghards, or Brethren of the Free Spirit, were the boldest and best known. They held "that the spirit is bound by no law, and annihilated the difference between the Creator and the creature." Eckhart, without doubt, laid himself open to the charge of countenancing these theories; and though they did not lead him to depart from austerity of life, they afforded a shelter and a sanction to others who were less high principled or less fastidious.

In Eckhart's writings we frequently meet with the expressions, so common among the mediæval Mystics (and answering to the "higher soul" of Plotinus), the "ground of the soul," or the "Divine spark at the apex of the soul," which is so closely akin to GOD that it is one with Him.

After Eckhart, and both owning themselves indebted to him, spring two branches

## Christian Mysticism

of mystical thought in Germany. The names most intimately connected with his—Tauler, Suso, and Ruysbroek—belong to the school of Devotional Mystics, whom we will consider lastly, though it is indeed a graceless task to differentiate between, and classify these great followers of GOD, “who were the chosen vessels of His grace, and the lights of the world in their several generations.” That they were at one in the *object* of their apprehension might well make them resent our clumsy labelling of their *methods* of apprehension. Boehme was at least as devotional and practical a Mystic as Tauler; and, on the other hand, no one can assert that Tauler’s walk with GOD was not as close as Boehme’s, for all that the symbolism of nature did not speak so loudly to him; nor that Fénelon was not as lofty a character as Kingsley. We will guard ourselves then against habitually regarding the Mystics as specimens, and return for the moment to those whom, for convenience, we put in the second class, and whom Mr Inge calls Nature Mystics. “The doctrine of Divine immanence”—Divine indwelling and permeating—“preached by Eckhart and his school was



## Paracelsus

followed," he says, "by the Nature  
Mysticism of Paracelsus," who is  
**Paracelsus.** familiar to many of us through  
Browning's poem. Mr Inge gives so clear  
and interesting a *résumé* of what the Nature  
Mystic thought and taught, that I will trans-  
scribe it wholesale. "Through all pheno-  
mena, it was believed, runs an intricate  
network of sympathies and antipathies,  
the threads of which, could they be disen-  
tangled, would furnish us with a clue  
through all the labyrinths of natural and  
supernatural science. . . . We find (at this  
time), especially in Germany, an extra-  
ordinary outburst of Nature Mysticism—  
astrology, white magic, alchemy, necro-  
mancy, and what not—such as Christianity  
had not witnessed before. These pseudo-  
sciences (with which was mingled much  
real progress in medicine, natural history,  
and kindred sciences) were divided into  
three provinces—of the Spiritual World,  
which were mainly magical invocations,  
diagrams, and signs; of the Celestial  
World, which were taught by Astrology;  
and of the Elemental World, which con-  
sisted in the sympathetic influence of  
material objects upon each other. These

## Christian Mysticism

secrets (it was held) are all discoverable by man; for man is a microcosm, or epitome of the Universe, and there is nothing in it to which he cannot claim an affinity. In knowing himself he knows both GOD, and all the other works that GOD has made." A greater Nature Mystic

than Paracelsus was Jacob  
Boehme Boehme, or Behmen, the wonderful shoemaker of Görlitz, who

was born in 1575. He was a guide of men and leader of thought even during his lifetime, and under his native conditions. There is not time to speak of his theory of the "Eternal Nature," and the "Seven Fountain Spirits," and I will merely quote two independent and beautiful thoughts of his, and pass on. He says: "The world is like some fruit, such as a plum or an apple, and has its rind-men, its pulp-men, and its core- or kernel-men; all with the same faculties, only the first live merely on the surface of things, the last perceive how the outer form is determined by the central life within"; and: "The true Philosopher's Stone is the new life in Christ Jesus. Only by victory over Self could any win victory over nature. To the selfish and the god-

## Tauler

less no secrets would be revealed. Such men were continually within reach of wonders they might not grasp" (Vaughan).

Boehme's works were well known to his

**Law and** ardent disciple and exponent,  
**English** William Law, one of the great  
**Mystics** English Mystics. With these

it is impossible to deal adequately; but, as their works are more or less accessible to all, it must suffice to pass their names in brief review. The poems of Francis Quarles, George Herbert, and Henry Vaughan are well known; the sermons and discourses by John Smith, Henry More, Whichcote, and others—the Cambridge Platonists—should be equally familiar. A new edition of a mystical work, "The Revelations of Divine Love," by a nun, the Lady Julian of Norwich, has recently been issued. Many of these writers belong to what are called the Devotional Mystics, our third class, whom we must now consider, beginning with the great German group of the fourteenth century.

In this group the most commanding

**Tauler** and the most attractive figure

is that of Tauler, the Dominican monk of Strasburg. The sweetness and

## Christian Mysticism

*naïveté* of the story of his "conversion" cannot be given except in the contemporaneous account, in whose genuineness there seems good reason to believe. This is the bare outline: Tauler had already achieved honour and reputation as a preacher in Strasburg, and was living a blameless life, when one day there came to the place an unknown layman (afterwards found to be Nicholas of Basle, one of the greatest of the "Gottesfreunde"), who, after hearing him preach several times, and receiving his priestly ministrations, was moved to tell him that he was "suffering himself to be killed by the letter," and was yet in the night of darkness, nor had yet tasted the sweetness of the Holy Ghost. Then said the master, "Dear son, I would have thee to know that, old as I am, I have never been spoken to in such fashion all my life." But after this very natural outbreak Tauler was so worked upon by the layman's words, that he gave himself up to follow his counsels entirely. These were hard indeed. "You must," said he, "take up your cross and follow our Lord Jesus Christ and His example in utter sincerity, humility and patience, and must

## Tauler

let go all your proud ingenious reason, which you have through your learning in the Scripture. You shall, for a time, neither study nor preach, and you shall demean yourself with great simplicity towards your penitents : . . . you shall enter into your cell, and read your Hours, and also chant in the choir if you feel inclined, and shall say Mass every day. And what time is left, you shall set before you the sufferings of our Lord, and contemplate your own life in the mirror of His ; and meditate on your wasted time in which you have been living to yourself, and how small has been your love compared to His love. . . . And it is my belief that one bitter drop which GOD will pour out for you will be that your good works and all your refraining from evil, yea, your whole life will be despised and turned to nought in the eyes of the people ; and all your spiritual children will forsake you, and think you are gone out of your mind ; and all your good friends and your brethren in the Convent will be offended at your life, and say that you have taken to strange ways." All of which came to pass. Tauler, at nearly fifty years old, set himself to this

## Christian Mysticism

absolute abasement and self-surrender, and for nearly two years humbly strove that the Divine life might be brought forth in him. At the end of that time, Nicholas advised him to preach, and it was given out that he would do so on a certain day. He ascended the pulpit, but, choked with tears, could not deliver his discourse. "So the people departed, and this tale was spread abroad, so that he became a public laughing stock, despised by all; and all the people said: Now we all see that he has become a downright fool. And his own brethren strictly forbade him to preach any more because he did the Convent great injury thereby, and disgraced the Order with the senseless practices that he had taken up, and which had disordered his brain." Nicholas, however, encouraged him, and bade him not despair, but at the end of five days to ask permission to preach to the brethren. "Such great and profound instruction," they then admitted, "with high and Divine wisdom, we have not heard for a long time." After this he was allowed to preach again, this time with marked and wonderful success; and the account goes

## Tauler

on to say that "the Master made progress in the Divine life, and received such wisdom by the grace of the Holy Spirit, that he . . . came to be held in such esteem and honour throughout the land, and also in that city, that whenever the people had any weighty matter—spiritual or temporal—to transact, he was called in to settle it, and whatever he counselled them was right in their eyes to the end of his life." The humility of this biography (which he himself overlooked) does not see fitting to mention that, when the Black Death raged in Strasburg, Tauler worked night and day among the plague-stricken people, daring to disregard the Interdict, which would have deprived them of every form of spiritual comfort. Some of Tauler's sermons are translated, and are full of a tenderness and simplicity beyond words. "He who is too full of his own joys and sorrows to get beyond himself can never come to know himself. . . . Is it not a pitiful thing that a religious man should spend his whole industry and sole effort, and have his thoughts turned day and night upon his own little doings, and should be so full of them that he can

## Christian Mysticism

hardly properly hold converse with GOD and with his own heart! . . . If a man, while devoutly engaged in prayer, were called by some duty in the Providence of GOD to cease therefrom and cook a broth for some sick person, or any other such service, he should do so willingly and with great joy . . . believing not only that GOD would be with him, but that He would vouchsafe him, it may be, even greater grace and blessing in that external work, undertaken out of true love, in the service of his neighbour, than he should perhaps receive in the loftiest contemplation." Once more : "Oh, how often does man give himself up in will to GOD, and take himself back again as quickly, and fall away from GOD ! But now begin again, and give thyself to Him afresh, and yield thyself captive to the Divine Will in rightful allegiance, and trust thyself to the power of thy Father. . . . Trust Him wholly, and seek His righteousness. For therein is His righteousness shown, that He abideth ever with those who heartily seek Him, and make Him their end, and give themselves up to Him. In such He reigns, and all vain care falls away of itself in those who



## Theologia Germanica

thus keep close to GOD in true self-surrender."

"Self-surrender"—this is the supreme mystery of the Christian Mystic, "that which is everywhere proclaimed but not understood save by a right judgement." This is why he takes for his keystone, and pivot, and unshakeable rock the saying of Christ: "Whosoever will save his life shall lose it: but whosoever will lose his life for My sake, the same shall find it." It is the manner of their acceptance of this, that makes the Mystics a flock within the Christian herd. Plenty of Christianity is preached and practised in which it takes a more or less prominent, but still an incidental place. For the Mystic, it is his Alpha and his Omega. It is the theme of the divine descant of the "Theologia Germanica," and the "Imitation of Christ." The unknown "priest and warden of the Teutonic Order in Frankfurt," who wrote the "Theologia Germanica" about the year 1350, saw clearly that the higher life, the union with GOD, the Divine indwelling of all Mysticism, can invade and occupy the soul of man *only so far as* the usurper

## Christian Mysticism

self, gives way. Others have said what comes to the same thing, both before and after ; but few have conveyed into it that austere manliness, that counting the cost, but knowing it will be nothing to be accounted of, if indeed he may win Christ, which make of the "*Theologia Germanica*" a mystical handbook of almost equal value with—some even place it before—the "*Imitation*." This is its teaching : "The more the Self, the I, the Me, the Mine, that is, self-seeking and selfishness, abate in a man, the more doth GOD'S I, that is GOD Himself, increase in him. . . . So long as a man . . . doeth anything, or frameth a purpose for the sake of his own likings, or desires, or opinions, or ends, he cometh not unto the life of Christ : . . . When we say that we ought to resign and forsake all things, this is not to be taken in the sense that a man is neither to do nor to purpose anything ; for a man must always have something to do and to order, so long as he liveth . . . but . . . so long as a man seeketh his own will and his own highest good, because it is his, and for his own sake, he will never find it. For a man's highest good . . . is that

## Ruysbroek

he should not seek himself, nor his own things, nor be his own end in any respect, either in things spiritual or things natural, but . . . only the praise and glory of GOD, and His holy will. . . . And where there is this union . . . there is no spiritual pride nor irreverent spirit; but boundless

humility, and a lowly broken heart.” And this says Thomas à Kempis also: “From this vice,

the hidden inordinate love of self, springs almost all that must be utterly rooted out. . . . But because few labour to be perfectly dead to themselves or wholly go forth from themselves, they remain enmeshed in self, nor can they be lifted up in spirit above themselves.” The “Imitation” is so much in the hands of all, that further quotation from it is needless. The two other Mystics of this fourteenth century

group are Ruysbroek and Suso. Ruysbroek, a Belgian monk, retired in old age to the monastery of Grünthal, whither many persons resorted, desirous of obtaining his direction in spiritual matters. He dwells specially on the necessity for the firm intention, the conscious striving. “Ye are as holy as

## Christian Mysticism

ye truly will to be holy," he said to two ecclesiastics who came to him for in-

struction. Suso was an ascetic and a visionary ; his writings are deeply poetical and are interspersed with accounts of visions and ecstasies vouchsafed to him, in one of which he beheld "the blessed master Eckhart, who counselled him to absolute detachment from the world ; the way to attain this," he said, "is to die to self and to maintain unruffled patience with all men." We find in Ruysbroek and Suso the Dionysian doctrine of the Divine Dark ; "the soul," says Suso, "becomes ignorant of itself and of all things : it hovers, reduced to its essence, in the abyss of the Trinity."

This is akin to much of the language used by the large class of Spanish Mystics. The Inquisition did its best to stamp out Mysticism in Spain, and condemned the writings of most of the men whom we have been considering. St John of the Cross and St Theresa were essentially Mystics of action, and worked a wonderful reform in the fervour and self-abnegation of the

## Mme. Guyon, Fénelon

religious orders of their time; and both showed a like zeal and skill in organizing communities of men and women who should revive the poverty and simplicity of primitive Christianity. Their unremitting activity was not for a moment incompatible with their belief that the highest state of the Christian soul is spiritual night, passivity; and through them and their

**Molinos** successor, Michael de Molinos, was preached (though it did not originate with them) the doctrine called Quietism. This is variously modified by the various types of character that have been drawn to it. Molinos taught two ways to the knowledge of GOD—meditation and contemplation, passive rather than active contemplation being the highest state attainable. Readers of "John Inglesant" will remember the account there given of Molinos and the *Quietist* controversy.

A modification of Quietism **Mme. Guyon, Fénelon** was also the cause of conflict between Fénelon and Mme. Guyon on the one side, and Bossuet and other high officials of the Church on the other. The "Life of Mme. Guyon," by

## Christian Mysticism

Upham, will be read and re-read by all who love to dwell on the highest types of Devotional Mysticism. Her teachings and those of Fénelon are practical, lofty, inspiring, and second to none for the lift and insight which they afford. They are not quoted from here, as in the main they repeat what we have already drawn from various sources, though they have a directness and beauty of expression all their own.

Before summing up the principal features of Mysticism, its errors and safeguards, a few words must be said on modern Mysticism. It does not need much telling for us to be aware that Nature Mysticism contains most of the formulæ which are returning to us in a certain phase of modern thought. In its highest aspiration, which I take to be to establish the influence of the spiritual in, through, and upon the things of sense, it can do nothing but good. But its aspirations, or those of its exponents, are not always upon this level; and some of the levels are very much lower. Nothing testifies so clearly to the limitations of a tight-shut little mind as to say, of any

## Maeterlinck

well-attested statement of whatever kind, I refuse to believe it. That things bad and good, suggestive and purposeless, and altogether beyond everyday experience do happen, are matters which, if alleged upon trustworthy evidence, no thinking being has the right to deny. It would be equally inept to assert that because they may be called manifestations of the supernatural, therefore they are all of good. Some of them may be, we hope. But "the rulers of the darkness of this world" are certainly very active, and probably very pervasive, and extremely powerful. Any attempt, though it may be quite a legitimate one, to force ourselves into secret matters must be guarded by a lofty, definite, and pure intention. This modern Nature Mysticism may perhaps be described as a theurgic Theism; and the old dangers are always turning up with the old faces for those who will recognise them. Pantheism, as we have said, is far from obsolete. A great deal of modern Mysticism rejects the supremacy of the Christian revelation; and so long as writers of such great beauty as Maeterlinck and a host of others, elevating and suggestive,

## Christian Mysticism

ignore that the highest mystical life must be hid *with Christ* in GOD, so long must we believe them to have apprehended in part only.



### III

## SUMMARY

### (a) FEATURES

FOR above all the lofty figures whom the Mystic can summon to his support stand two, higher even than the rest, and there is no going behind their teaching. These are St Paul and St John, and to these, standing firmly on the supreme mystical paradox of Christ Himself, we can make final and conclusive appeal. "The Gospel of St John is the charter of Christian Mysticism," says Mr Inge; and certainly the Epistles of St Paul contain its code.

#### **i. Self-surrender**

Dying to live—the paradox of Christ — self - surrender, is a thought that lies at the heart of his whole conception of spiritual life. What is more truly Pauline and more truly mystical than this passage: "Always

## Christian Mysticism

bearing about in the body the dying of the Lord Jesus, that the life also of Jesus might be made manifest in our body. For we which live are alway delivered unto death for Jesus' sake, that the life also of Jesus might be made manifest in our mortal flesh."

Another mystical idea which Mr Inge says "is never absent from the mind of St Paul is, that the individual Christian must live

2. Christ's  
Life in us

through and experience personally the redemptive process of Christ. The life, death, and resurrection of Christ were for him the revelation of a law, the law of redemption through suffering. The victory over sin and death was won *for* us, but it must also be won *in* us." A beautiful illustration of this thought is found in one of the old hymns in the "Lyra Germanica"—

What profits it that Christ is born,  
And bringeth childhood back to men ;  
Unless our long-lost right we mourn,  
And win through penitence again,  
And lead a God-like life on earth  
As children of the second birth? . . .

# Symbolism

What profit ye His death and cross  
Unless to self ye also die?  
Ye love your life, to find it loss,  
Afraid the flesh to crucify.  
Wouldst live to this world still? Then know  
His death to thee is barren show. . . .

What profits it that He is risen,  
If dead in sins thou yet dost lie?  
If yet thou cleavest to thy prison,  
What profit that He dwells on high?  
His triumph will avail thee nought,  
If thou hast ne'er the battle fought.

3. **The Three Stages** The division of the spiritual life into three stages, purifying, illuminating, and united, or rather uniting, with GOD, of which we have spoken earlier, has been made by Mystics in every age; and subdivided according to their various methods of thought and temperament.

4. **Symbolism** Symbolism, allegory, hidden meanings are found by Mystics in all departments of life. Since it is part of their creed to believe in a unity of all things, it is natural they should trace, and rightly trace, the interdependence of the material and the spiritual. A true symbolism is delight-

## Christian Mysticism

fully distinguished by Mr Inge from its perversion, which too frequently passes current for the real thing: "The symbolic value of natural objects is not that they remind us of something which they are not; but that they help us to understand something that they in part are."

And another mystical idea of the greatest practical value is, **5. Reality of the Ideal** that it is the Ideal only which is the Real. I know nowhere a more exalted description of how to pluck out the inner heart of things than is given by the old Wiltshire clergyman in that exquisite mystical romance, "John Inglesant." He says: "It seems to me more and more, that the soul and spirit of every man in passing through life among familiar things is among supernatural things always. . . . If you can receive this mystery, and go through the path of life which lies before you, looking upon yourself as an immortal spirit walking among supernatural things—for the natural things of this life would be nothing were they not moved and animated by the efficacy of that which is above nature

## Visions

—I think you may find this doctrine a light which will guide your feet in dark places ; and it would seem, unless I am mistaken, that this habit of mind is very likely to lead to the blessedness of the Beatific Vision of GOD." This is a radiance and a watchword for those inevitable moments when we seem shut away from GOD'S hand, and the wheels of life drive their heaviest.

Little has been said about Visions and Ecstasies, for we have been  
6. Visions seeking to dwell upon the essentials rather than on the extravagances of Mysticism ; and although, doubtless, they have been granted to many, and the modern Roman Church looks upon them as the very sign-manual of a mystic, may it not be that their connexion with Mysticism is incidental and not integral? And that the temperament to which Mysticism is congenial is the temperament on which the faculty of seeing visions is often, but certainly not always, bestowed ?

# Christian Mysticism

## (b) TENDENCIES TO ERROR

As regards the errors that are charged against Mysticism, I have  
**1 & 2. See pp. 23 & 24** spoken of two, and there are three others, perhaps more liable to beset the path of the ordinary wayfarer. These are: a disparagement of the forms of religion; a "striving to wind oneself too high for mortal man"; and individualism. They have one and all been discountenanced by at least as many Mystics as have fallen into them.

The great revivals of Mysticism can in more than one instance be  
**3. Dispar-  
agement of  
forms** traced to attempts having been made to limit the operation of the Spirit to ordinances prescribed by authority. When this has been the case, a revolt has naturally carried men's minds too far in the opposite direction, and Mysticism has undertaken "the vengeance of a suppressed truth." There is no denying that it has frequently allied itself with the spirit of independence, and the desire to escape the paralysing tendency of empty custom. Mr Dill, in his book on Roman Society about the fourth century, speaks

## Undue Exaltation

of this desire as manifesting itself in Pagan circles in Rome, where the Paganism which was really living and stirred souls was not, he says, that of the Roman or Greek religions, but that of Eastern mystical thought. The Oriental mysteries "raised the worshipper above the level of cold, conventional conformity, and satisfied, in some way, the longing for communion with the Deity." This spirit and that of independence were at work in the German mystics who preceded the Reformation: the Quietists were hunted down as deadly foes of the Church in Spain, Italy, and France. But Mysticism never sets itself against authority *as such*. And whatever is traditional or symbolic in worship will naturally appeal to the Mystic's sense of the unity of all things; and emphasizes his position as a part of the whole.

That Mystics aim too high is a charge which many of us can bring with a comfortable sense of security against its recoiling on our own heads. The command however is universal: Be ye perfect. The Mystics at least try; and I do not know that they are more tempted than other

4. Undue ex-  
altation

## Christian Mysticism

strugglers to blur the distinction between endeavour and achievement.

5. Individualism: and its two safeguards      Lastly: the danger of individualism. There we must take breath and think. What room is there in the Mystic's scheme of life for others? How can he serve them better by being a mystic than if he were not one? If he cannot do this, he may as well leave off at once, for he is on a wrong tack. But he can, he most certainly can; and in two ways.

1. Prayer and Thought      The first is by Prayer and Thought. Of Prayer it is not necessary here to speak. But the use of Thought as an agency comes to us along the lines of modern Mysticism, and needs a little explaining. It has been written somewhere that our thoughts about people help to create an atmosphere around them. Mr Clifford Harrison, in his book called "Notes on the Margins," writes more than one passage to the same effect. He says: "If waves of force pass through earth and rock; if certain forms of light pass through our bodies and substances which we call solid; and if the electric force can be transmitted with certain



## Prayer and Thought

direction and intelligent application of use, without the clumsy apparatus and medium of wires, it may well be that psychic and mental force can be and is transmitted and exercised in a hundred unknown and mysterious, but absolutely natural ways in the unrecognised ether of thought." Again: "It seems a curious and dismembered argument which allows that physical forces of all kinds issue and radiate from our earth in all directions through space, but that the greatest force the earth knows—the will and spirit of Man, the force in fact, to which the whole creation and evolution of the earth appear to have led, has no issue and no radiation." And once more: "Our physical world and atmosphere are filled and penetrated . . . with forces which have voyaged from the sun, and those distant suns, the stars. Our thought-atmosphere, and the world of human life may be, *à fortiori*, filled and penetrated with mental and spiritual influences." Here we may see how that to believe in the Ideal as the only Reality may be turned to daily, momentary and incalculable service to those whom we desire to serve. "We are what we are trying to become," we have been taught. If,

## Christian Mysticism

as we are bound to believe, this is true of *each* of us, we must remember it is no less true of *each other* of us. The love that on its negative side "thinketh no evil," on its positive side is active "in believing all things" for good. To think truly of our friends, we must think the best of them; by thinking the best of them, we *make* the best of them. This is expressed very characteristically by Maeterlinck when he says: "You are more truly that which you are in the eyes of the woman who loves you, than that which in your soul you believe yourself to be." If we keep our thoughts from disloyalty, there will be fewer words and acts of disloyalty, and going further than this, we may believe that while by allowing thoughts of bitterness, contempt, and hostility (even if deserved) we are doing devil's work upon others, by thinking gentle, faithful, and ennobling thoughts about them, we shall wrap an atmosphere around their souls in which gentleness, faithfulness, and nobleness will assuredly flourish.

### II. Purification for Service

The other way is shown forth in a sermon by Canon Holland. All the self-surrender, the pur-

## Purification for Service

gative, the illuminative, the contemplative way are good for us, are indeed the best for us, but only in so far as they are not made an end in themselves. He is speaking of the symbol of salt: "Salt is good": it is clean and clear and separate, and is no good *as* salt if it is not all these things. But salt in itself and for itself is as undesirable—if not actually as vapid, as the white of an egg: "it is good—not for any purpose of its own but for use . . . it exists solely to keep from corruption, not itself, but that which needs its services. . . . Let those who criticise the necessity for self-discipline and self-purification look out over the wide world which is to be won to GOD. . . . Not for pride, not for self-pleasing, not for selfish comfort, but simply in order that we may love all sinners more and serve them better are we called upon to . . . purify ourselves as He is pure. . . . For their sakes I sanctify Myself, He said." There never was a more complete vindication of the Mystic and of his toilsome self-stripping. Of the service that inheres in the fullest union—service that is, we might almost say, involuntary, being essential, integral to the united state of the believer

## Christian Mysticism

with Christ, which must be the aim of every true Mystic, the following comment on this very sermon we have been considering, gives a glimpse, under a chemical analogy, suggested by the symbol of salt: "As all natural substances, in their complete being, have a definite crystalline form, and volatilise, given the requisite heat . . . so union with Christ is the mystical crystallisation," and "when this is attained the purified soul is in a state" in which the fire of love sets free its hidden qualities to diffuse and penetrate spontaneously. By this diffusion, this setting free, we are transmuted into powers of service beyond our knowledge. In purification for serving, then, and in this further ministration through union, we surely rescue the Mystic from the charge of self-concentration and absorption in his individual salvation: and show that by scaling the mystical ladder, the highest ideal of loving unwavering service is attained.

We may fitly end with the closing words of the "Theologia Germanica": "That we may thus deny ourselves and forsake and renounce all things for GOD'S sake, and give up our own wills, and die unto ourselves,

## Purification for Service

and live unto GOD alone, and to His will, may He help us Who gave up His will to His Heavenly Father—Jesus Christ, our Lord, to Whom be blessing for ever and ever.”

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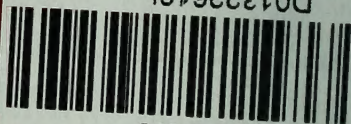
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